

THE CLASSICAL BACKGROUND OF THE
SCRIPTORES POST THEOPHANEM

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This paper was delivered, very nearly in its present form, as a lecture on the 30th April 1953 at the Symposium of the Dumbarton Oaks Research Institute. It would not have been possible to change the style without re-writing the paper *in toto*; and the reader is therefore asked to bear in mind that it was composed with a view to its oral delivery. The emphasis laid on the *Vita Basilii* is due to the fact that this lecture and the one on *De Administrando Imperio* which followed it, were designed first and foremost to illustrate the personal works of the sovereign.

THE *Vita Basilii*,¹ or Life of the emperor Basil I by his grandson Constantine Porphyrogenitus, forms, as we all know, Book V of the historical collection known as "Theophanes Continuatus." The only reason for the title "Theophanes Continuatus" is that the work commences chronologically at the point where the Chronicle of Theophanes left off, that is, at the year 813. In plan and style the two works are completely different. "Theophanes Continuatus," as it survives today, is in two main divisions.² Books I to V are each concerned with the history of one separate emperor of the five who reigned between 813 and 886. Book VI comprises the history of all five emperors who reigned between 886 and 963. Book VI, which is the work of at least two hands, was written, or at any rate published, after the death of Constantine VII, and therefore does not concern us now. But the first section, Books I to V, was written under the direction of, and, in part, actually at the dictation of, Constantine himself, after his recovery of the supreme power in 945 and before his death in 959.³ It is thus the most important document we possess for testing the cultural climate of Constantine's age as it affected the writing of history. Books I to IV, the histories of Leo V, Michael II, Theophilus and Michael III, show clear traces of having been composed by one hand. Book V, the Life of Basil I, is quite certainly the work, and to a large extent the composition, of Constantine himself,⁴ who also acted as general editor of the series. Book V differs sharply in form and slightly in style from Books I to IV. This is not so much because the authors are different as because each is copying a different model. None the less, each of the two sections is strongly influenced by the other,⁵ and the two are obviously meant to stand parts of one historical collection. Moreover, the classical background of each is the same, though not the classical model. Some remarks therefore on the origins and outlook of the work as a whole are a necessary introduction to our study of Book V.

Professor Weitzmann has shown⁶ that one characteristic which distinguishes the art of the era of Constantine VII is a revival of interest in the portrayal of the human figure, and a revival of the classical or Hellenistic manner of rendering it. The "depersonalized," mediaeval figures swell and round themselves into living human forms under the genial influence of this

¹ Theophanes Continuatus (ed. Bonn., 1838) 211-353.

² See F. Hirsch, *Byzantinische Studien* (Leipzig, 1876) 175-182; G. Ostrogorsky, *Geschichte des byz. Staates* (2nd ed., Munich, 1952) 171.

³ For the date, see J. B. Bury, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 15 (1906) 551, 571-573.

⁴ Theoph. Cont., 211/15-17.

⁵ Bury, *op. cit.*, 570.

⁶ Kurt Weitzmann, *Greek Mythology in Byzantine Art* (Princeton, 1951) 207.

newly-discovered or newly-appreciated tradition. It is, in the literal sense of the word, a revival of humanism. This is what takes place also in the contemporary historiography. The characters of the historical writings of Constantine's school are no longer the depersonalized *types*, angelic or diabolical, who walk stiffly through the pages of the essentially mediaeval Theophanes. They have become, or are at least in process of becoming, individual men, compounded of good and bad, of idiosyncrasies and of what used to be called "humours." Art and literature are, after all, two closely connected manifestations of the spirit of each age. And when we find this tendency towards classical humanism in literature so firmly connected with the age of Constantine himself, we recognize it at once as useful confirmation of Professor Weitzmann's thesis regarding the art of the same epoch.

In truth, between the time when Theophanes laid down his pen at the beginning of the ninth century and the time when Psellos took up his at the end of the eleventh, something like a revolution towards humanism in historical writing had taken place. Two brief examples, of the earlier and later styles, will illustrate the contrast more vividly than an hour of exposition. First, here is Theophanes' portrait of Constantine V, the great iconoclast emperor:⁷

It is now our task to catalogue the crimes of that most impious wretch, his [Leo III's] son, crimes most blasphemous and abhorred of Heaven (though we must do so with proper regard to truth and moderation, in that God, who seeth all things, is watching and surveying us also); so that our account may be of value to all who come after us, and even to those miserable and criminal pygmies who still to-day err in the obscene heresy of this archcriminal. . . . Now this abandoned maniac, this blood-thirsty and ferocious beast, who had achieved power by usurpation and not by law, at once fell away from our God and Saviour Jesus Christ, and His pure and holy Mother, and all the Saints; for he was one who was perverted by magic and filthinesses, by bloody sacrifices and the excrements of horses, one who rejoiced in beastly wantonness and in the invocation of devils, as who from his earliest youth was acquainted (in a word) with every pursuit that corrupts the soul.

So much for truth and moderation. You see, the portrait is not of a man at all, but of a heretic and hence of a devil incarnate; and there he stands, painted on a wall in two dimensions, breathing fire and brimstone. It is not strange that in this daub we fail to recognize the brilliant statesman, the skilful and resolute commander, the learned, subtle and austere theologian, about whose tomb the populace of Constantinople, conscious of all they had lost, cast themselves down in an agony of supplication.⁸

If we now turn for a moment to Psellos and select one slight sketch out

⁷ Ed. De Boor, 413/10-25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 501/3-12.

of his brilliant portrait-gallery, the contrast is truly striking. Here is his description of John the Orphanotrophos, the all-powerful minister and brother of Michael IV, whom Psellos disliked almost as heartily as Theophanes disliked Constantine V.⁹

For myself, who often dined and drank with him, it amazed me that this man, drunkard and buffoon as he was, yet contrived to preserve the balance of the Roman empire on his shoulders. Even when he was drunk, he could follow all that was passing through the minds of each of his boon-companions, and, catching them (as it were) upon the hip, would afterwards call them to account for what they had done or said in their cups; so that they came to dread him drunk even more than they dreaded him sober. He was a strange mixture: he had long worn the garb of a monk, but he never thought of observing the decencies of conduct which such a habit imposes; and yet such duties as the divine law prescribes for that profession he made some outward show of performing, and those who wasted themselves in riot and wantonness he absolutely despised. But if any chose an honourable life, or passed it in the liberal exercise of the virtues, or enriched his mind with classical learning, of all such he was the enemy, and would do all he could to vilify to each the object of his devotion. Such was his singular conduct towards the generality; but towards his brother the emperor he still preserved the same disposition, with an unchanging, undeviating firmness of demeanour.

That is an individual man, with his lights and shades, whom we should have no difficulty in recognizing if we met him in real life.

It seems clear that this humanistic trend started, or was revived, in the first half of the tenth century. It can be illustrated in more than one work of the period. We have only to look at what survives of Constantine's own *Excerpta* from classical historians to see that a large part of them deals not so much with historical events as with the development and exploration of individual character. Equally significant is the form of the historical work of Genesios and of Theophanes Continuatus: instead of a continuous or annalistic narrative, the whole is divided up into separate "reigns"; and while these divisions cannot be called formal biographies, such as those of Plutarch, they do form treatises in which the sovereign is the central character, and a noticeable effort is made to paint the character as that of a living man, compounded of good and evil, and not of a puppet blessed or cursed by Heaven. It is also clear that this alteration of tone is due to a close familiarity with, and a conscious imitation of, classical models.

Constantine VII himself was deeply read in the classics; but his ready and acknowledged quotations from Homer or Sophocles are the mere trimmings of his prose works, and were the stock-in-trade of Byzantine writers in almost all ages. His fundamental theories of education, especially of a ruler's education, of teaching and learning, and of history-writing derive from three

⁹ Michel Psellos, *Chronographie*, I (ed. Renauld, Paris, 1926) 60-61.

authors to whom he makes no overt acknowledgement: they are Isocrates, Plutarch and Polybius.

The influence of Isocrates is apparent on the very first pages of Theophanes Continuatus, for the Preface,¹⁰ when its verbal difficulties have been mastered, turns out to be a simple restatement of Isocrates' philosophy of the *logos*, that "hymn," as Professor Jaeger¹¹ has called it, "written in lofty prose," which is set out in the *Nicocles*, the *Panegyricus* and the *Antidosis*. The parallels in sense and phraseology¹² are not to be mistaken. It is plainly laid down that Constantine, as the ideal monarch, has for his chief duties the care of his subjects and the cultivation of the *logos*, which is the basis of all culture and the single faculty in which mankind excels the beasts. It would certainly be wrong to claim for Constantine the rediscovery of Isocrates as an educational legislator: there are strong grounds for believing that the works and methods of Isocrates had already been reintroduced as the basis of rhetorical education by Photius in the University founded by Caesar Bardas in the latter half of the ninth century. The attention paid by Photius to Isocrates in the *Bibliotheca*,¹³ the lengthy recapitulation of the Cyprian hortations in Photius' letter to Michael of Bulgaria,¹⁴ and the explicit acknowledgment to Isocrates in the *Paraeneseis* of Basil I to Leo VI,¹⁵ which were also probably compiled by Photius, clearly suggest this. Nor would it be accurate to say that the Isocratean view of the practical value of history was a rediscovery of the Constantinian school: Mr. Kustas, in his as yet unpublished doctoral dissertation for Harvard University, has traced the Isocratean component in Photius' own conception of History, and shown how Photius was able to combine exposition of God's purposes, viewed from the Christian standpoint, with practical examples drawn from past, and even from pagan, history. But the school of Constantine introduced into this tentative revival of classicism in history-writing a humanism which is foreign to preceding generations. Man, as an individual, is invading the foreground.

Isocrates, the founder of our modern western educational theory, was an empiric; and the empiric may, and indeed must, proceed by means of the *empeiria* of his predecessors. The passages in which this doctrine is laid down in Constantine's own work occur mainly in the *De Administrando Imperio*.¹⁶

¹⁰ Theoph. Cont., 3-5.

¹¹ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia*, tr. Highet, III (Oxford, 1945) 89.

¹² E.g., *Nicocles* 27 D: τοῖς μὲν γὰρ ἄλλοις οἷς ἔχομεν οὐδὲν τῶν ἄλλων ζώων διαφέρομεν; Theoph. Cont., 4/10-11: τοῦτο ᾧ τῶν πάντων διαφέρομεν.

¹³ MPG CIII, cols. 434, 436.

¹⁴ MPG CII, cols. 661 ff.

¹⁵ MPG CVII, col. lvi B.

¹⁶ Ed. Moravcsik, 1/13-15; 13/12-14; 46/167-169. Cf. also Theoph. Cont., 265/16-266/6.

But it is important to note that this doctrine involves quite a different view of history from that which had guided Theophanes, or Nicephorus, or George the Monk. These historians were primarily concerned with the workings of Providence and the sins of the people. But the empirical historian, if he is to accomplish his task of educating his reader in the *practical* conduct of life or of rule, must study not the workings of Providence but the deeds and especially the characters of men. This led on to a close scrutiny of the multitudinous biographies and humanistic histories of later antiquity. Hence the prime importance for the writings of Constantine's school of the works of that prince of biographers, Plutarch.¹⁷

It is easy to see the working of this new influence in the early books of Theophanes Continuatus, written beneath the emperor's own eye. The man is beginning to predominate over the event. But more than this. Plutarch, in his famous introduction to his Life of Alexander,¹⁸ with which Constantine was thoroughly familiar and parts of which were perhaps included in the original collection of the *De Cerimoniis*,¹⁹ explains that individual character must be studied, not only in its grand and dominating lineaments, but also in its smaller idiosyncrasies, which may be more revealing of the man than as he acts with the eyes of the world upon him. It is the application of this principle that makes the early books of Theophanes Continuatus what they are. Especially worthy of notice is the long study of the reign of Theophilus in the third book. Here the whole man is before us, with his restless pursuit of justice,²⁰ his strong religious prejudices,²¹ his endearing regard for a disloyal wife,²² his aestheticism,²³ his scholarship,²⁴ his one lapse from conjugal fidelity,²⁵ his insistence that his subjects should cut their hair,²⁶ his curious prying into the booths of his market-place to inquire into the current prices of wine and comestibles.²⁷ When we remember that this is the portrait of an iconoclast sovereign of the ninth century drawn by an Orthodox historian of the tenth, and when we remember what the Orthodox historian of the ninth century did for the iconoclast sovereign of the eighth, we may well regard Theophanes Continuatus as a triumph of classical principles.

¹⁷ Cf. R. J. H. Jenkins, *Bull. Acad. roy. de Belgique*, Cl. de Lettres, XXXIV (1948) 72.

¹⁸ *Init.*, οὐτε ταῖς ἐπιφανεστάταις πράξεσι κτλ.

¹⁹ *Ed. Bonn.*, I, 515/17-18.

²⁰ *Theoph. Cont.*, 87/9 ff; 92/18-94/18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

²² *Ibid.*, 91/3-5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 106/17-107/5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 116/11-16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 95/7-14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 107/6-13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 87/16 ff.

Ostrogorsky²⁸ has rightly said that Theophilus must have been a most interesting character. But how much should we know of that interesting character if its biographer had not imbibed the precepts of Plutarch, and had presented Theophilus as the ranting, roaring Herod in whose guise he appears in the monkish Life of Michael Synkellos?

I have briefly indicated the two main classical influences which contributed to a revival of humanistic history. But I must not omit to mention the third. In his study of the reign of Leo V, the Continuer of Theophanes says:²⁹ "I am inclined to think that history will be valuable as real education and as a training-ground for politics only if it can point to the truest causes of things and to the hidden motives of action; and I doubt whether any historical work that does not do this can be of the slightest use to the reader." These rather priggish accents lead us straight to Polybius, and in fact the words are taken from the preface to his famous history.³⁰ The influence of Polybius on the Continuer is chiefly discernible in this very insistence of the latter on the need *rerum cognoscere causas*. But it is not fanciful to detect it also in the Continuer's tentative efforts towards objectivity. Polybius maintains that if we pretend to pragmatism, then impartiality, however distasteful, must be achieved. We shall often find ourselves blaming our heroes and praising our villains. But then, that is so in real life also, and real life is what history is about.³¹ It is in conformity with this principle that the Continuer does justice to the energy and ability of Leo V,³² to whom the monkish tradition is unanimous in ascribing a villainy as unrelieved as that of Copronymus; and, even under the menacing cloud of imperial propaganda, contrives to slip in a word of praise for the Caesar Bardas³³ and Michael III.³⁴ I do not wish to be misunderstood on this point. The *reigns* of the emperors who immediately preceded Basil I could not be represented as other than uniformly disastrous, because it was part of the imperial myth that Basil supervened to bring salvation after fifty years of uninterrupted decline. What I mean is, that the *characters* of these sovereigns receive a treatment which, though less objective than they deserve, is a good deal fairer than they could have received in any other epoch since antiquity, given the

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, 168.

²⁹ Theoph. Cont., 21/19 ff; cf. 167/17-19.

³⁰ Polybius I, 1: *φάσκοντες ἀληθινωτάτην μὲν εἶναι παιδείαν καὶ γυμνασίαν πρὸς τὰς πολιτικὰς πράξεις τὴν ἐξ ἱστορίας μάθησιν, ἐναργεστάτην δὲ κτλ.*; cf. Theoph. Cont., 21/19-21: *καὶ γὰρ ταύτην μόνην εἵπομεν ἂν ἐγὼ εἶναι ἀληθινωτάτην παιδείαν τε καὶ γυμνασίαν πρὸς τὰς πολιτικὰς πράξεις, τὴν ἐναργεστάτην αἰτίαν.*

³¹ Polybius I, 14, 4-5.

³² Theoph. Cont., 30/13-19.

³³ *Ibid.*, 185/2-8; 193/2-3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 210/17.

political exigencies of the historian's time. It would indeed be absurd to claim that these enlightened ideas were already fully operative in the middle of the tenth century. But it is obvious that they had taken root; and how they flourished in the following century readers of Psellos' *Chronographia* will instantly perceive.

The identity of this pupil and colleague of Constantine who wrote the first four books of Theophanes Continuatus is still quite unknown. The eleventh century historian Skylitzes makes a tantalizing reference to his predecessors Theodore Daphnopates and Niketas Paphlago,³⁵ the latter of whom is presumably the author of the *Vita Ignatii*. It was suggested by Krumbacher³⁶ that Daphnopates was the author of the latter part of Book VI. But the Russian scholar Shestakov went much further than this, and claimed that Books I to IV were also written by Daphnopates.³⁷ His proofs were stylistic, that is to say, he compared the arrangement of clauses, choice of diction, and use of proverbial phrases in Theophanes Continuatus with those in hagiographical works also attributed to Daphnopates. But these proofs are not convincing: indeed, it would not be difficult to show by exactly similar comparisons with the *Vita Ignatii* that the books were written by Niketas Paphlago, a conclusion which would be, on external evidence, highly unlikely. What such methods of comparison plainly do show, is that the historians of this group were all brought up in the same rhetorical school, and used the same rhetorical style and vocabulary. This is not to say that stylometry is useless here; but it must be much more minutely and rigorously applied than Shestakov or anybody else has hitherto applied it in order to obtain a conclusive result. For the time being, therefore, we must be content to leave the author of Books I to IV in his anonymity.

When we turn from Books I to IV to Book V, from the works of the pupil to the work of the master, we are in high hopes of a really convincing and realistic portrait of the Founder of the Macedonian Dynasty. But, as we begin to read the rhetorical pages of uniform eulogy and applause, we are for a moment affected by profound disappointment. Can it be that, while the pupil has acquired so strong a tincture of the new classical spirit, the master has remained behind in the dead whites and blacks of mediaevalism? But the disappointment is only momentary. As we read on, the classical spirit of the work becomes more and more apparent. But we are looking at Basil I, not through the eyes of Plutarch, but through those of Xenophon and Isocrates.

³⁵ Cedrenus, ed. Bonn., I, 4/7.

³⁶ *Geschichte der byzantinischen Litteratur* (2nd ed., Munich, 1897) 459.

³⁷ D. Anastasijević and Ph. Granić, *Deuxième Congrès international des études byzantines* (Belgrad, 1929) 35-45.

The *Vita Basilii* does not follow the pattern of Peripatetic, Plutarchian, character-developing biography. It is a splendid specimen of the mature type of Isocratean *enkomion*, of which the *Evagoras*, if not, as its author claimed, the first, was certainly the most famous and influential in antiquity; and was the heir of the earlier verse *enkomion*, a species of composition which provided much mirth to the satirical genius of Plato. It is well known that the Plutarchian and Isocratean modes of biography are different in conception. The purpose of the former is educative and psychological: it attempts, in a factual and chronologically ordered study, to elucidate the personality of the subject by a careful choice of historical material and anecdote. If it is not history, yet the insistence on order and veracity gives it considerable historical value. The purpose of the *enkomion*, on the other hand, is not historical but moral and political. The object is to present the perfect picture of a prince or statesman, and to hang it up for the admiration and imitation of all succeeding generations. From this perfection all that is unworthy or even of a dubious quality must be sedulously excluded. It is a rhetorical exercise, strung on an artificial framework of conventional virtues and noble deeds. It pays little or no heed to chronological sequence. Its value as history is very small indeed: for whatever historical facts are recorded are conditioned by the form, and suspect owing to the nature of the *enkomion* itself. The rules are so strict, the categories so clearly defined, and the very phraseology so compellingly suggested, that the encomiast has little to do but to select his material, refine it, and melt it down into the conventional mould.

These two forms of ancient biography are in fact not entirely separable, as Steidle has most recently emphasized.³⁸ The two influenced one another. Notably, the system of describing the events of a man's life by categories, by deeds of war, deeds of peace, and so on, is one which may be found even in antiquity outside the *enkomion* proper, as in Plutarch's *Life of Pericles*. None the less, the two forms remain, in origin and principle, two. The Continuer of Theophanes followed the one, and Constantine the other.

Now here it must once again be emphasized that the rediscovery of the classical *enkomion* is not to be attributed to Constantine's own generation. It was the inevitable concomitant of the revival of Isocratean studies in the latter part of the ninth century. The fact that the *Vita Basilii* is the earliest neo-classical *enkomion* of the epoch to survive to our own time by no means implies that it was the first to be written in that age, and there is a good deal of subsidiary evidence to suggest that it was not. References to the σοφία

³⁸ Wolf Steidle, *Sueton u. die antike Biographie* (Munich, 1951) 151 ff.

and *δικαιοσύνη* of the Caesar Bardas in the Book IV of Theophanes Continuatus³⁹ might suggest that that great man may have been himself the object of such a panegyric; nor could the students of his university have discovered a worthier recipient. But when we reach the early tenth century the evidence is much plainer. Arethas, the learned archbishop of Caesarea, in an oration delivered in honour of his master Leo VI on the 30th August or 1st September 902,⁴⁰ extols the emperor first in Platonic terms as the philosopher-king of the *Republic*, and last in Aristotelian terms as the truly happy man sketched in the *Nicomachean Ethics*; but, in between, in terms of the Isocratean *enkomion*, as surpassing those sovereigns who have excelled in civic virtues, wars foreign or domestic, building of cities and harbours, and other categories of Hellenistic panegyric. While therefore we cannot describe Arethas' oration as an *enkomion* in due classical form, it provides abundant evidence that that form was known and studied by the turn of the century, and we can hardly doubt that many attempts to imitate it were made among students of rhetoric. Here, as elsewhere, Constantine was profiting by the experience of his immediate predecessors.

Now, the scheme of a royal *enkomion*, as it was developed and systematized by the Hellenistic followers of Isocrates, is this: the first section contains an account of ancestry, parentage and birth; the second, of youth and career down as far as the *ἀκμή*, or most significant portion of life; the third and fourth are deeds, *πράξεις*, in peace and war, or war and peace; and the fifth, a section on private or family life, death, will, and other personal details. All these elements are present in their correct order in the *Vita Basilii*, and it is plain that we have to deal with an orthodox classical panegyric. Can we go further?

It is necessary at this point to pay a warm tribute to Professor P. J. Alexander, who, in an excellent little study entitled "Secular Biography at Byzantium,"⁴¹ laid proper stress on the significance of the revival of interest in the "lives" of individual, secular men in the time of Constantine VII. He rightly saw that the *Vita Basilii* was of the type of *enkomion* known as *Βασιλικὸς Λόγος*, all the elements of which are minutely prescribed in the hand-book *Περὶ ἐπιδεικτικῶν* of Menander Rhetor in or about the third century A.D.⁴² Professor Alexander then went on to discuss the interesting problem of how this traditional form of ancient rhetoric was preserved so that it was able to recrudescence in the tenth century at Byzantium. He suggested that the con-

³⁹ Cap. 26, 30.

⁴⁰ *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 47 (1954) 12-13.

⁴¹ *Speculum*, 15 (1940) 194-209. I am much indebted to Professor Alexander's kindness in sending me a copy of this valuable work.

⁴² *Rhetores Graeci*, III (ed. Spengel, Leipzig, 1856) 368 ff.

necting link may have been hagiography, which survived as a living tradition during the centuries between Procopius of Gaza and Constantine VII, while secular biography was dormant. He instituted three stylistic comparisons, first between the *Vita Basilii* and hagiographical texts, second between Leo VI's Funeral Oration on his parents and hagiographical writings, and last between the *Vita Basilii* and Leo's Funeral Oration. Like Shestakov, he had no difficulty in pointing to many verbal parallels; but that this indicates any active influence of hagiography on the new school of secular biography, he hesitated to affirm, and I should be inclined to doubt. It seems to me that the stylistic and even the formal correspondences between the *Vita Basilii* and hagiography may be due simply to the facts that both kinds of biographers were trained in the same tradition of antique rhetoric, and that both species of biography go back independently to the main stem of Graeco-Roman biography.

Again, it is common ground that the *Vita Basilii* is a Βασιλικὸς Λόγος, and that the component parts of this type of exercise are catalogued in order by Menander. But, despite some very close parallels, which are well noted by Professor Alexander,⁴³ there is no need to assume that Constantine was writing by the instructions of Menander or of any other rhetorical preceptor. The fact is that Menander himself was outlining a system of *enkomion* which had by his time become absolutely stereotyped, and was exemplified in countless panegyrics of late antiquity, most of which have not survived to our time. Constantine is just as likely to have borrowed his form from one or several of these as from a schoolmaster's digest of instructions. We have seen that the Continuer proper, the author of Books I to IV, which, though not formal biographies, yet contain much material which is peculiarly biographical, went back for his inspiration to Plutarch: that is to say, he made a conscious cast back to antiquity and to classical models which suited the spirit of his age. It seems likely, therefore, that a similar jump back over the centuries was made by Constantine also. Let us throw our net a little wider, and see what we draw in.

We must begin by asking, what was Constantine's object in choosing *enkomion* as the form in which to write his grandfather's life? It is obvious that his aim, like that of all panegyrists was political. The Macedonian dynasty had ousted the Amorion in 867, after two atrocious murders in which Basil himself had been the prime mover. Basil had been fully aware of the significance of his establishment on the throne, and of the importance of preserving it to his family. It must not be forgotten that by 867 the empire

⁴³ *Op. cit.*, 198, note 7.

was already beginning to feel the spring of that energy which brought it in the following century to its second and last golden age, a golden age over which, but for Basil's resolution and treachery, might have presided the sons and grandsons, not of Basil, but of Caesar Bardas. Students of Basil's reign cannot fail to be struck by the recurrence of words like νέος, νέα, καινούργιος which are used in relation to his doings.⁴⁴ *Et dixit qui sedebat in throno: Ecce nova facio omnia*. Basil therefore appeared in the eyes of the tenth century legitimists as the re-founder and renovator of the Roman state. It is as such that he appears in his grandson's panegyric. To the classical scholar there was one figure in Roman history with whom it seemed eminently suitable that Basil should be compared, and that was Augustus Caesar. We should therefore expect that an examination of such lives of Augustus as were known to Constantine might be a fruitful approach to the *Vita Basilii*. It is very pertinent to recall, as Professor Alexander has in fact recalled,⁴⁵ that when, a century and more before, Einhard had sought a model for his hero Charlemagne, he had found him in Suetonius' *Divus Augustus*. It is interesting to note, both in the East and the West, this survival of the prestige of the founder of the Roman Empire, who reigned at the birth of the Heavenly King, and who, more than any sovereign except Constantine the Great, filled the eye as the earthly counterpart of the Eternal Emperor. It is altogether remarkable that *Vita Basilii* shows no trace of being influenced by the *Vita Constantini*.

There are of course other, more concrete, traces in the *Vita Basilii* to prove that Constantine has Augustus in mind as the model for his grandfather. In chapters 20–27 we have a digression on the evil and foolish character of Basil's predecessor Michael III. This passage is introduced in exactly its canonical place in the rhetorical scheme; it is a *psogos*, an invective, designed to show how bad things were before the hero came to power, so as to contrast them with the μεταβολή πρὸς τὸ κρεῖττον which immediately followed his elevation. Such a device is common even in the earliest prose *enkomia*: we have an excellent example in the *Evagoras* of Isocrates. Now, the features of this portrait of Michael III are, as I have shown at length elsewhere,⁴⁶ directly borrowed from Plutarch's *Life of Antony*, and, there is reason to think, also from the lost *Life of Nero*. The borrowing is not merely notional in this case. Actual words and phrases of the *Antony* are repeated in similar contexts in the *psogos* of Michael. But why Antony? Constantine need not have looked far, even in the pages of Plutarch, to find models more

⁴⁴ E.g. *De Cerimoniis*, 118/18; Theoph. Cont., 332/3.

⁴⁵ *Op. cit.*, 208.

⁴⁶ See note 17 above.

black and atrocious than Marcus Antonius. It is the circumstances of Antony's life which are significant. The frivolous and unworthy Antony, whose victory would have been a disaster for the world, goes down before the sage, austere, statesmanlike Octavian, who fills it with joy and prosperity and peace, and inaugurates the new kingdom of Saturn.

So, with some confidence that we are on the right track, we turn to Plutarch's *Life of Augustus*, which, we remember, was the first in a row of Lives of chronologically consecutive emperors from Augustus to Vespasian. Alas! it is lost. Of this interesting series only the Lives of Galba and Otho remain. But for the student of the *Vita Basilii* the loss of Plutarch's *Augustus* may be of less importance than might appear. We must remember that the *Vita Basilii* is an *enkomion*, not a *bios*. The model is indeed Augustus, but the Augustus of the Prima Porta and of the Vienna cameo, not the *Divus Augustus* of Suetonius. While therefore in Plutarch's work we should have discerned no doubt some correspondence of matter, and perhaps even of language, with the *Vita Basilii*, it could not have helped us as to the form of the latter. It happens that for this we have a more instructive source for comparison. In the years immediately after the death of Augustus, his close friend the Syrian historian Nicholas of Damascus wrote an *enkomion* on him. This *enkomion* is preserved in two fragments, or groups of fragments. These fragments survive in one place and in one place only: namely, in the historical *Excerpta* of Constantine Porphyrogenitus.⁴⁷

The work of Nicholas is written in the strictest form of *enkomion*, with which even Menander would have had no fault to find. The two preserved groups of fragments carry Octavian's story down only as far as the year 43 B.C.; and hence Laqueur maintained⁴⁸ that the whole was in fact only an account of his earlier years. But this, as Steidle has shown,⁴⁹ is certainly erroneous: the original, as its programme makes clear, was a full-length biographical *enkomion*. Nicholas certainly laid great emphasis on the importance of ancestry and upbringing as the basis of future greatness. But that fragments from later parts of the work are not found in Constantine's *Excerpta* is due simply to the fact that they were not germane to *Virtutes et Vitia* and *Insidiae*. Many were no doubt included in sections of the encyclopedia now lost, as in those on *Andragathemata* and *Demegoriai*.

The orthodox βασιλικὸς Λόγος as Menander tells us,⁵⁰ starts off with ac-

⁴⁷ *Excerpta Historica iussu Imp. Constantini Porphyrogeniti Confecta*, II (ed. Büttner-Wobst, Berlin, 1906) 353–361; III (ed. De Boor, Berlin, 1905) 33–58.

⁴⁸ Pauly-Wissowa *RE* XVII cols. 422–423.

⁴⁹ *Op. cit.*, 133–134.

⁵⁰ 370–373.

counts of ancestry, birth, physique, nurture and education (γένος, γένεσις, φύσις, ἀνατροφή, παιδεία); then follow deeds in war and deeds in peace (πράξεις κατὰ πόλεμον καὶ κατ' εἰρήνην). The programme of Nicholas is virtually the same:⁵¹ it is, γένος, φύσις, γεννηταί, τροφή, παίδευσις, and then ἔργα πολέμου καὶ εἰρήνης. The order of *Vita Basilii* is γένος, γεννηταί, φύσις, τροφή and παιδεία, and then ἔργα εἰρήνης καὶ πολέμου. As Professor Alexander has noted,⁵² in the *Vita Basilii* the deeds of peace precede those of war, which is the one noteworthy departure from Menander's system; but even here in one passage⁵³ Nicholas promises the same arrangement. A characteristic feature of birth and childhood is the portents (σύμβολα) which attend them. If they do not exist, says Menander cynically,⁵⁴ you need not hesitate to invent them. In the *Vita Basilii* these prodigies are, first a prophetic dream of Basil's mother, and second a persistent eagle that perched on a haycock under which the child was sleeping. Dio Cassius,⁵⁵ followed by Skylitzes⁵⁶ and Zonaras,⁵⁷ narrates two precisely similar portents connected with Augustus: a prophetic dream of Atia, and an eagle who took away the boy's bread and brought it back again. Suetonius⁵⁸ tells the same stories. As such portents are, we saw, enjoined by *enkomion*, it is no very bold guess that Nicholas is the source of all the versions.

Again, Nicholas lays great emphasis on Atia's influence in the education of her son.⁵⁹ This is not an essential feature of *enkomion*,⁶⁰ but there is more than a hint of it in *Vita Basilii*,⁶¹ where Basil's mother, after her husband's death, plays a significant part in her son's career, first by forbidding and then by encouraging his migration to the capital. Since probably four-fifths of Nicholas' work is lost, we can do no more than point to these very brief indications of its influence on the form of the *Vita Basilii*; but it is possible that Constantine has Nicholas in mind when at the end of the *Vita* he says⁶² that he has narrated ἡ πρὸ τῆς βασιλείας ἀγωγή καὶ ὅσα ἡ τῆς ὅλης αὐτοῦ ζωῆς ὑπόθεσις; for Suidas⁶³ says that Nicholas ἔγραψεν . . . τοῦ βίου Καίσαρος ἀγωγήν.

⁵¹ *Excerpta*, II 354/10–12; III 38/24–25.

⁵² *Op. cit.*, 198.

⁵³ *Excerpta*, II 354/6–7.

⁵⁴ 371/10–12.

⁵⁵ 45. 1.

⁵⁶ Cedrenus, ed. Bonn., I, 301/3–9.

⁵⁷ Ed. Bonn., II, 339/13–340/5.

⁵⁸ *Divus Augustus*, cap. 94.

⁵⁹ *Excerpta*, II 355–356.

⁶⁰ But cf. St. Luke 2:48–51.

⁶¹ Theoph. Cont., 220–223, 225.

⁶² Theoph. Cont., 352/22–353/1; cf. *ibid.*, 212/9.

⁶³ Ed. Adler, III (Leipzig, 1933) 467/33–34; cf. Laqueur, *op. cit.*, col. 403.

It would be a fascinating, and perhaps not unrewarding, task to attempt by means of a close comparison of *Vita Basilii* with the *Divus Augustus* of Suetonius to restore something of what the original *enkomion* must have contained: for the first two texts show certain parallels of incident which cannot be accounted for by direct borrowing, but must go back to a common original.⁶⁴ But that is not our task to-day. Nor can it be claimed that Nicholas was Constantine's sole model. As we have seen, Plutarch's work is often under contribution;⁶⁵ and at least one passage seems to be directly inspired by the *Evagoras* of Isocrates.⁶⁶ But the points which may properly be stressed regarding Nicholas of Damascus are, first, that the purpose of the *Vita Basilii* is to present Basil as the new Augustus; second, that the work is an *enkomion* in the strictest form of ancient rhetoric; and third, that just such an *enkomion* on Augustus is known to have been read and excerpted by Constantine himself.

We see then that both the Continuer of Theophanes and his imperial master went for their different models back to the Graeco-Roman epoch, just as did the contemporary artists. We may thus speak with justice of a revival of the classical tradition, which, re-established in education in the late ninth century, inevitably led on to the humanism of the tenth, just as the latter inevitably followed the former in fifteenth century Western Europe.

I have not left much time for the second part of my task, which is to examine the historical value of the *Vita Basilii*; and this matters the less since the form of the *enkomion* automatically vitiates its claim to historical accuracy. Menander Rhetor observes⁶⁷ that in a βασιλικὸς λόγος nothing of a pejorative or of even a dubious nature can be allowed to appear; and in this example, nothing does. Moreover, the method of narration *per species* and not *per tempora* robs the *Vita Basilii* of almost all chronological value, whereas it is quite possible to build a reasonably accurate chronology out of the more straightforward narratives of the Continuer. But, however much we may regret all this, we should not blame Constantine for failing as a historian; we should rather admire him as an encomiast, since his work is, within its rather narrow limits, an artistic triumph. *Enkomion*, as Polybius has reminded us, is not, and does not pretend to be, history; it is a κανὼν, an ἀνδρίας, an ἀρχέτυπον μιμήσεως.⁶⁸

It is obvious that the different sections of a panegyric must vary very greatly in respect of historical reliability. Where the subject is truly great and

⁶⁴ Cf. below p. 28.

⁶⁵ Cf. the 'Bucephalos' story, Theoph. Cont., 230-231, and the Homeric tag *ibid.*, 352/15.

⁶⁶ Cf. Theoph. Cont., 219/15-21 with *Evagoras* 193 A.

⁶⁷ 368/5-7.

⁶⁸ Theoph. Cont., 212/12-13.

can honestly be commended, that is to say, to put it bluntly, where the biographer has no particular reason to lie, it may provide useful information. And *vice versa*. In examining it we have always to apply the criterion of interest. The first section of the *Vita Basilii*, which tells of Basil's descent from the Arsacids on the father's side and from Alexander the Great on his mother's side; of portents which attended his childhood; and of his arrival, unknown and penniless, in Constantinople,⁶⁹ is historically quite worthless. The only parts in it which are certainly true are that Basil was of Armenian stock, and that either he, or more probably his father, was for a time prisoner in Bulgaria. The rest is fairy-tale, and tells the story of the noble prince in the guise of a beggar, so that, as in all *enkonomia* since *Evagoras* and *Cyrus*, his rise may be due to his own unaided virtues. There was an additional reason to bring in the doctrine of the Poverty of Basil.⁷⁰ It was part of the imperial propaganda towards the poorer class that the imperial house sprang from an immediate origin not less humble than their own, and could therefore understand and side with them against the already dangerous power of the feudal aristocracy. The picturesque story of Basil's wandering to the capital is almost certainly fictitious. Genesisios in an unguarded moment lets out the truth.⁷¹ Basil was, at the time of his coming to Constantinople, a relation by marriage, perhaps even a son-in-law, of Constantine Maniakis, the great logothete and grandfather of Genesisios himself. Maniakis had been a prominent figure at the court of Theophilus when Basil was in his cradle. When therefore Basil came to Constantinople, it certainly was not to try his luck. He was, as his story makes clear, very well looked after from the start.

The section which deals with Basil's rise to power over the bodies of Bardas and his nephew Michael,⁷² if not wholly false, is in the highest degree misleading and disingenuous. Here we are able to check Constantine's account by the authentic narrative of Symeon Logothetes. There can be no doubt whatever that Basil was the actual murderer of Bardas, and that the gang of bravoos who murdered Michael were his creatures and, indeed, very largely his own relatives. The *psogos* of Michael,⁷³ is rhetorical and untrustworthy almost from beginning to end. The intense black of Michael's reign gives place to the unnatural radiance of Basil's dawn. Yet Basil, though willed by God to succeed, is by God delivered from the sin of having to put his predecessor out of the way. Exactly the same way out of the difficulty is

⁶⁹ Cap. 1-10.

⁷⁰ Cf. R. J. H. Jenkins, *The Byzantine Empire on the Eve of the Crusades* (Historical Association, London, 1953) 14.

⁷¹ Ed. Bonn., 110/9-10.

⁷² Cap. 11-19.

⁷³ Cap. 20-27.

found for Evagoras by Isocrates.⁷⁴ There is no doubt that the motives for painting Michael's character in the darkest colours possible were political. But the precise extent of the injustice done to him is still a matter of dispute. That he was not the criminal buffoon depicted in the *Vita Basilii* we may admit without hesitation; on the other hand, it is hard to deny that he was a weak, unmanly creature, absolutely under the thumb of his successive favourites, one who could feel the sense of his enormous power and position only when he was drunk, which, to say the truth, was often enough.⁷⁵ The really significant step in Basil's career was the murder, not of Michael, but of the Caesar Bardas.

After this tendentious opening, the *Vita* settles down to give, in the approved sequence of categories, an account of the *πράξεις* of Basil's reign. His *πράξεις εἰρήνης*, financial, legal, ecclesiastical and administrative,⁷⁶ are naturally chosen to illustrate the conventional virtues of *δικαιοσύνη*, *σωφροσύνη*, *οἰκίτης* and *φιλανθρωπία*. But they introduce some information of a general character about the economic state of the empire at that time, which is useful to the historian. The chapter on *εὐπαιδία*, the Flourishing Family,⁷⁷ provides a puzzle. Constantine says that Basil had four daughters, and that he made them all take the veil and become brides of Christ. The implication is certainly that all were unmarried. In the parallel passage of Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni*⁷⁸ we read that Charles also forbade his daughters to marry, with unhappy results. Einhard in turn is thinking of the troubles of Augustus over his daughter and granddaughter, the two Julias, whose immoralities were such that he had finally to shut them up altogether. Suetonius⁷⁹ records their disgrace quite frankly. But how did the encomiast Nicholas treat this awkward affair? May he not have said that his hero, believing that modest women were better neither seen nor heard, placed his female relatives in a dignified retreat? In point of fact, Basil's daughters were not all unmarried. It is probable that one of them married Christopher Magister,⁸⁰ and possible that another, Helen, married that Artavasdos who rendered Basil a signal service at a perilous crisis of his career.⁸¹

The *ἔργα πολέμου*⁸² form the longest and historically much the most valuable section of the book. Constantine warns us that his order of events

⁷⁴ *Evagoras*, 193 D-E.

⁷⁵ See Ostrogorsky's sober appraisal, *op. cit.*, 180.

⁷⁶ Cap. 28-34.

⁷⁷ Cap. 35.

⁷⁸ Cap. 19.

⁷⁹ *Divus Augustus*, cap. 65.

⁸⁰ *Cont. Geo. Mon.*, ed. Bonn., 841/18.

⁸¹ *Acta Sanctorum*, Nov., III, 882 D.

⁸² Cap. 36-71.

may be faulty, and adds that he cannot, at this late time, date with accuracy the incidents described. None the less, much painstaking and, comparatively speaking, honest work has gone into his account of the campaigns. His descriptions, where we can check them, are, except for the Bari campaign, tolerably accurate so far as they go, and they are often the only descriptions of Basil's wars to survive in the Greek sources. As the *ἔργα πολέμων* of Augustus started with a civil war, so those of Basil start with the struggle against the Paulician heretics. Then follow the chief campaigns against the Eastern Saracens, ending with the terrible defeat of Styppiotas at Tarsus in 883. The western campaigns start with the siege and capture of Bari in 871; then follow the naval campaigns against the Tarsite, Cretan, Egyptian and African Saracens; and we end with the loss of Syracuse in 878. The fact that Basil was not in personal command of most of these operations enables the panegyrist to record defeats where they occur, and to lay the blame for them on the generals. Basil saw his schemes for the west, on which he had expended so much care, meet shipwreck in the fall of Syracuse; and Southern Italy was saved only by the energy and skill of Nicephorus Phocas. But on the sea he more than held his own; while in the east, he, his son, his son-in-law, and his brilliant marshal Andrew Krateros made a permanent contribution to the rise of the Middle-Byzantine Empire. All this appears fairly enough in Constantine's account, and is its sole purely historical merit.

After some short notices of Basil's private life and benefactors,⁸³ Constantine, the artist and antiquary, enters *con amore* on a lengthy description of his grandfather's achievements in architecture.⁸⁴ His minute and accurate catalogue is of great value for the history of Byzantine art. But it would be a mistake to suppose that it is introduced merely because the author himself was interested in architecture and art, though that is no doubt the reason for its length. Building was, as Professor Downey rightly notes,⁸⁵ one of the essential activities of the ideal monarch, who thus demonstrated his powers of creation and general benevolence. The germ of the idea is seen in the *Evagoras*, who, finding his city *ἐκβεβαρβαρωμένη*, beautified it with various public constructions.⁸⁶ But Augustus again might provide the classic example; and even the panegyrist need scarcely have exaggerated the achievement of the emperor who found Rome built of mud-bricks and left her built of marble.

The eulogy continues with some remarks on Basil's missionary work,⁸⁷

⁸³ Cap. 72-77.

⁸⁴ Cap. 78-94.

⁸⁵ *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 38 (1938) 10, note 2.

⁸⁶ 198 C.

⁸⁷ Cap. 95-97.

which are parallel to the conciliatory labours of Augustus among foreign peoples, an account of which Nicholas promises us in his preface.⁸⁸ Next we come to Basil's dynastic plans, to the dreadful loss of his eldest son, and to his devising the crown upon his second son Leo, after the sad misunderstanding that had caused their temporary estrangement.⁸⁹ It is clear that more lies behind this interesting story of the plots of Theodore of Santabaris than is allowed to appear in the sources. The affair of a deluded father practised upon by a conjuring magician to the detriment of a cruelly ill-used son was so discreditable that even the encomiast can do no more than plead that Basil was more sinned against than sinning. But, again, we are struck by the parallel of Augustus' long estrangement from Tiberius, and his cold *hoc reipublicae causa facio* as he nominated his heir. It is not probable that Nicholas wholly passed this over. But, since he wrote under Tiberius, it is also not probable that he ascribed this natural antipathy between Augustus and Tiberius to anything but alien machinations. The relations between Basil and Leo were in fact so bad as to lend colour to the lying rumour that the latter was the son, not of Basil, but of Michael III. But this will not do for *enkomion*. And so, reconciled with his heir, Basil passes away (like Augustus, from a "flux of the belly"), leaving an empire restored, prosperous, and nearly at peace from end to end.

"In him might one see the indwelling of the quadruple virtue, and might admire his wisdom with his valour, his justice with his temperance, and all things continually advanced towards excellence. Then seemed it that the world had returned to its ancient order and estate, while its emperor watched with unwearying providence over the well-being of his subjects, and forbade the injury of one by another; and those who were set in authority strove to imitate the imperial piety, and mercy toward the poor, and justice toward all men."⁹⁰ *En redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna*.

The *Vita Basilii* is not history, even in the sense that the first four books of Theophanes Continuatus are history. When Constantine wished to impart information, he had very different methods and a very different style of doing it.⁹¹ The *Vita* is none the less the perfect copy of a purely classical original by a learned and sensitive classical scholar; and it has that touch of local colour which gives it its charm, like some enchanting neo-Attic relief of the Augustan age.

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⁸⁸ *Excerpta*, II 353/21-23.

⁸⁹ Cap. 98-101.

⁹⁰ Theoph. Cont., 315/7-17.

⁹¹ *De Administrando Imperio*, ed. Moravcsik, 1/8-15.